

p 29 WEEK 4: CROSSING THE JORDAN, GETTING RIGHT WITH GOD

Joshua 3:1–5:15

The Place of the Passage

The people of Israel got up in the morning and approached the Jordan River without any strategy for crossing except to obey Joshua and remember what God had done for their parents at the Red Sea. For three days they camped with the sound of floodwaters in their ears, the sight of the opposite shore reminding them of the mission ahead. For Joshua and the people, the experience of crossing the river would strengthen their dependence on the Lord and solidify their own place in God's redemptive story.

The Big Picture

At God's command, Joshua led the nation over the Jordan in a way that strengthened their dependence on the Lord and prepared them for what was ahead.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through Joshua 3:1–5:15, then engage with this section of Scripture using the questions below. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 397–401; available online at www.esvbible.org.)

p 30 1. Witnessing God's Wonders (3:1–17)

On a human level, passing over the Jordan is impossible. Both the waters and what is on the other side present a grave threat to Israel's life. List the features of this story that add a sense of impossibility.

The ark of the covenant was not a magic charm that allowed Israel to do miraculous things. The ark represented God's presence among his people. It was a symbol of his great holiness, as well as his grace and nearness. What is the ark's function in this episode (see 3:10–13)?

At one level, God's purpose in performing this miracle is to move his people into the land. But twice in this passage we have an indication of God's more significant purpose. What is this purpose?

What wonder has God performed for the Christian, and how does this advance the same purpose for his people today?

p 31 2. Declaring God's Mighty Hand (4:1–24)

Chapter 4 begins when “all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan,” yet the Lord still holds back the water for a time. In fact, all of chapter 4 takes place at the riverbank. There the Lord gives instructions for a memorial. At the end of the chapter, two purposes are expressed for this memorial, one each for two different groups. Who are these two groups, and what is the Lord's purpose for each?

What does the provision of this memorial tell us about God? What does the need for this memorial reveal about human nature?

In 4:14 we hear an echo from a verse in chapter 3. What verse is it? What does the repetition of this statement tell us about how God chooses to bring salvation?

Joshua 3:10 reveals God's purpose in leading his people using the ark of the covenant. What does chapter 4 reveal about God's purpose for the nations through this event?

p 32 3. Living and Leading on God's Terms (5:1–15)

Now that the nation has passed over the Jordan, we might expect an immediate move on Jericho. Instead, several things must happen first. The first order of business is circumcision, a covenantal imperative that had been neglected by this generation. Based on Joshua 5:9, how would you express the purpose of circumcision for Israel (see also Gen. 17:10–14 and Deut. 30:5–6)?

A second order of business involves another symbol given to Israel: the Passover. Read Exodus 12:1–14, 26–28. Answering with one sentence for each question, what was the Passover event, and why did the Lord want them to remember it?

At the end of this chapter we meet an unnamed man. This is likely the same figure mentioned to Moses by the Lord in Exodus 23:20–23 and 33:1–3. What indications do we have in Joshua 5:13–15 of this man's identity? Given the placement of this story between the crossing of the Jordan and the movement toward Jericho, what point is God making to Joshua and to us?

Humanly speaking, Joshua and the people had everything to fear: cutting-edge military technology, trained and determined armies, and walled cities built for war. But because of what God had done for them, and the presence **p 33** of the Lord's commander, they had every reason to trust his promises for what was ahead. Read Romans 8:31–38. On what basis can we trust

God's promises for the future? What do you need courage for today? Write out a brief prayer asking God to give you courage to stay faithful.

Read through the following *Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these reflections have for your walk with the Lord.

Gospel Glimpses

THE LORD WILL DO WONDERS. What must the people of Israel have felt when Joshua said, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you" (Josh. 3:5)? With no means of getting across the Jordan, they could nonetheless imagine how this might go. The Lord did "wonders" for their parents' generation when he struck Egypt and parted the Red Sea (Ex. 3:20). Now it was their turn. Yet these wonders would not fix Israel's problem of sin. More daunting than the Jordan is the human heart. Yet, for believers the spiritual wonder at work in us is more spectacular than anything Israel would ever see with their eyes. The power that raised Jesus from the dead has raised us and now works in us (Eph. 1:19–23).

REMEMBERING REDEMPTION. How kind is God to redeem us *and* bring to our remembrance what he has done! As God commanded Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, he gave him instructions for how this redemption was to be remembered in the Passover meal (Exodus 12). For Joshua's generation, 12 stones will help them tell their story. For new covenant Christians, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper to represent his body and blood, saying, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19; see also 1 Cor. 11:25–26). Likewise, baptism pictures our union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–4). The Lord knows our need and has graciously given us these symbols to remind us of our redemption.

p 34 Whole-Bible Connections

PATTERNS OF PROMISE THAT LEAD TO CHRIST. What do circumcision, the ark of the covenant, the Passover, and the land have to do with the New Testament Christian? They lead us to Christ by clarifying our need for, and the nature of, the salvation he brings. The Passover prepared God's people to receive Christ as their substitute (1 Cor. 5:7). Circumcision reminded them they needed a change that was more than skin-deep (see Deut. 10:16 and 30:6)—only through Jesus Christ's circumcision could the foreskin of their hearts be made clean (Phil. 3:3; Col. 2:11). The ark created a longing for true access to God, which came when Jesus dwelt among us, and in greater measure through the Spirit who now dwells in believers (John 1:14; 14:6). These may be some of the things Jesus explained to his disciples when, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

COVENANT AS THE PROMISE STRUCTURE OF SCRIPTURE. By grasping the internal structure of the Bible's story we can understand exactly how Joshua's patterns lead us to Christ and transform our lives. God's salvation story is revealed through a series of progressively

unfolding covenant promises: covenants with Noah and creation, with Abraham and his sons, with Moses and Israel, and with David and his future Son. Each of these covenants carries forward God's original purpose for his creation and his promise to redeem humanity and destroy Satan (Genesis 1–3), and each of these covenants is fulfilled in the coming of a new covenant in Jesus Christ (Jer. 31:31–34; Luke 22:20). The Sinaitic Covenant (sometimes called the Mosaic covenant), which provides the context for Joshua, includes commandments, provisions, and patterns preparing God's people to understand their need for a messianic leader. While Joshua would eventually bring Israel into the land, once in the land it became evident Joshua was not their final savior. Sin still plagued Israel, and Joshua would die. What Israel needed was a faithful covenant mediator who would win for them through obedience the blessing God explained to Moses, taking the curse that was theirs because of sin (see Gal. 3:13). As the New Testament puts it, "The law has but a shadow of the good things to come"; it was "our guardian until Christ came" (Heb. 10:1; Gal. 3:24; see also Matt. 5:17). Joshua is a wonderful example of how the Sinaitic Covenant functioned in ancient Israel and prepared the way for the final covenant Jesus would establish.

THAT ISRAEL MAY KNOW; THAT THE EARTH MAY KNOW. We should not miss the clear statements of purpose in this story. God leads with the ark so that Israel "shall know that the living God is among" them (Josh. 3:10–13); he leads his people across the Jordan as he had through the Red Sea "so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty" (4:24). This dual purpose—for Israel and for the earth—was at work when David decapitated [p 35](#) Goliath: "that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the LORD's" (1 Sam. 17:46–47). Worldwide witness to God's glory was why the Lord raised up Pharaoh 40 years before (Ex. 19:6), and it is what the prophets look forward to in the new creation (Hab. 2:14). While Adam's race failed to fill the earth with God's glory, the promised One would be a light to the nations (Isa. 49:6). Thus, while Israel's life was centered in the land and, later, in Jerusalem, this was only temporary. Before his ascension, Jesus sent his disciples from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), because—as God always intended—the knowledge of his glory must cover the entire earth.

Theological Soundings

THEY STOOD IN AWE OF HIM. One thing we cannot escape, in reading the book of Joshua, is the centrality of Joshua to everything God does for his people. When God speaks and leads, he does so through Joshua, just as he did through Moses. Of course, Joshua will die, just as Moses died. And when he does, Israel will need another leader. And for Israel, as for us, there is the promise of One to come who will surpass both Joshua and Moses: "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you ... —it is to him you shall listen" (Deut. 18:15). If the people stood in awe of Joshua, how much more shall we stand in awe of the risen Christ! Such a sense of awe is the true goal of theological reflection and the study of Scripture.

A COMMANDER, AND THE PREINCARNATE CHRIST. We have good reason to believe that the nameless man that appeared to Joshua is the preincarnate Son of God. He is divine, since Joshua worships him without rebuke, and yet he is distinct from the Lord who speaks to Joshua.

Clarity comes with the progress of revelation. The Son of God was the Father's agent in creating the world (John 1:1–3; Col. 1:16–20; Heb. 1:1–3) and in redemption (Rom. 5:12–21; Eph. 1:7–12; Col. 1:13), and it appears that he was also the means of rescuing Israel from Egypt (see Jude 5). By appearing to Joshua at this moment, God is saying, "I'll take care of this." This commander does not deal with Joshua on Joshua's terms, but confronts Joshua with a sword drawn. Allied with God's commander through obedience to God's Word, Joshua and his mission cannot fail.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Joshua 3:1–5:15 for your life. How does this passage lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises? Write down your reflections under the three headings we have considered and on the passage as a whole.

p 36 1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Joshua 3:1–5:15

As You Finish This Unit ...

Thank God in prayer for the wonder of the gospel and the symbols by which we remember and proclaim what God has done: the Lord's Supper and baptism. Pray for God's people to fear him, and his mighty hand to be known throughout the earth.